

## **Biblical Narratives of Anger and Its Contemporary Psychological Implications**

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The psychology of anger presupposes its natural occurrence along with basic human emotions such as happiness, sadness and many more. Although anger research is not very popular, scientists-practitioners have attempted to investigate and test methods and interventions to manage anger. The current paper is built on four objectives. First, it aims to capture what psychology has perceived of anger by looking at its nature while correspondingly reviewing the literature of what has been done; works of notable researchers and experts are used as theoretical guide. Second, there is an attempt to use the Holy Bible as a subsidiary source for materials that can possibly evoke response and reflection. Thirdly, these experiences are related to the present time via varied psychological analyses; the viewpoints that are raised in this section are from the perspective of a psychology practitioner rather than that of a Bible scholar. Lastly, this analysis is viewed in terms of its applicability to psychotherapy and psychological intervention in contemporary society especially as applied to the Filipino Christian clientele through an anger transformation model.

*Keywords:* anger, aggression, hostility, biblical narratives, emotion-focused therapy

## INTRODUCTION

Anger is inarguably a universal truth in the field of human behavior. It is one of the basic emotions alongside happiness, sadness, fear and disgust. Anger is pervasive and powerful. It is also widely misunderstood and ignored (Mental Health Foundation, 2008). In a 2010 study by Carlozzi and colleagues, it was found that while behaviors and cognitions have been studied more extensively than emotions, the research on anger has lagged behind research on other emotions. Early observations by Simon (2005) also noted that anger is not a popular topic of study—angry people are not fun to be around and are difficult to treat. DiGiussepe and Tafrate (cited in Feindler, 2006), stated that anger studies may be unpopular because “no one likes to hug a porcupine.” One can expand a porcupine to a snake or a skunk. Similar to these animals, when angry people are threatened, they can become verbally argumentative, volatile and at times, menacing, thus perhaps the continuing avoidance of anger studies.

A thorough review of the psychological disorders listed in the 2000 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association shows at least five disorders that include anger as either necessary or sufficient to reach a diagnosis. These disorders are oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, borderline personality disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, and bipolar depression (DiGiussepe, 2001). In the fifth edition of DSM (2013), in particular, anger expression is reflected by poor self-control and a violation of social norms or others’ rights.

Deffenbacher, Oetting and DiGiussepe (2002) have emphasized that psychologists need to be informed about anger because they often work with anger-involved people. To work with angry individuals necessitates tailored fit programs that are carefully designed to answer their varying needs. The helping professional therefore looks at the profile of any client and thoroughly reviews any information deemed necessary in prevention, remediation and intervention programs. As Trull (2008) puts it, clinical psychologists use psychological interventions to induce changes in a person’s behavior, thoughts, or feelings.

Limbadan (2011) investigated the use of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) in managing the anger level and intensity of some adolescents. EFT focuses on the three-step process: emotional awareness, emotional regulation then emotional transformation. EFT was developed by Leslie Greenberg, a

Canadian psychologist who, in 1979, started employing this therapy with couples and published the book entitled *Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy* in 1988 and another publication *Facilitating Emotional Change in Individual Therapy* in 1993. EFT is essentially a therapy that focuses on working with “lived emotion” in the session. Whereas both psychodynamic and cognitive therapies tend to work more with conscious cognition, the focus in EFT is on how to work with people's actual feelings in the session and then how to work with changing emotions in the session, so that the real emphasis is on trying to understand emotional processes and how emotions change. EFT is an integrative approach, combining client-centered, gestalt, and cognitive principles. It also includes interactional systemic perspectives that elucidate humanistic insights with an empirical approach.

Using the Adolescent Anger Rating Scale, the level of anger was determined employing the pretest-post test design. This was a two-phase study wherein the first phase consisted of developing a tool to measure the effectiveness of EFT to the identified participants. This tool is developed by the researcher and is called the Emotional Awareness, Regulation and Transformation Scale (EARTS). The second phase involved the conduct of the therapy as a psychotherapeutic intervention, ran for 12 sessions. Identified as the participants of the study were 16 high school students of a private sectarian university, on Strict Disciplinary Probation Status. As a program to lessen the expression of anger, EFT was given as an alternative intervention to help these adolescents deal properly with this very upsetting and controlling emotion. A significant improvement was observed with the participants post-intervention.

### **Problem and Objectives**

It is promising for psychology practitioners to prove that psychological intervention (i.e., psychotherapy) can help in anger management because ultimately, it is the therapeutic component of psychology practice that encourages practitioners to continue to be helping professionals. Indeed, outcome research is beneficial not just to clients but to therapists as well. The application of EFT to young people indicates that adolescents may be helped.

It is however misleading to think of anger and its expression and impact to be unidirectional wherein there is always a negative outcome. Certainly, as anger is only a behavioral medium, there has to be an anchor that connects

to anger as necessary or anger that brings about change, awakening or epiphany. This has prompted me to look at anger from a different perspective.

Lester (2003) in his book entitled *The Angry Christian: The Theology for Care and Counseling* caught my interest as he stated that too many Christians have been taught that anger is always sinful. The author, who is a professor of pastoral theology and pastoral counseling at Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School, further admits that "anger that is expressed destructively toward others, ourselves, or God adversely affects our spiritual journey. Anger's power can destroy our health, our relationships, our community, and our sense of God's presence and grace." Yet Lester argues that the capacity to become angry, an attribute of Jesus himself, is a significant aspect of humanness, rather than sinfulness.

This aspect of humanness triggers even more my interest to look further for a written support because there is an implied sense of advantageous outcome when anger is expressed. As a practitioner, when dealing with clients with deep-seated emotional disturbance, I subscribe to EFT as one of my therapeutic approaches. In the process however of this pursuit, I came to a realization that it is immensely necessary to revisit several biblical figures that manifest an anger experience as this will ultimately shed light to this contemporary psychological exposition.

There are four objectives of this paper. One, it aims to capture what psychology has perceived of anger by looking at its nature while correspondingly reviewing the literature of what has been done. Works of notable researchers and experts have been used as theoretical guide. The second objective is that as part of a therapist's creativity to look for new techniques or tool for intervention, I am attempting to use the Bible as a subsidiary source for materials that can possibly evoke response and reflection from my clients. I teach and hold clinic in a university where it is primarily Christian as most of its students and staff are believers. Believing in the power of narratives, it is my purpose to present the stories as they happen. The third objective was to relate these experiences to the present time and provide varied psychological analyses. The viewpoints that are raised in this section are impressions of a psychology practitioner and not as a Bible scholar. The last objective was to present its applicability in psychotherapy and psychological interventions in the context of contemporary society especially to the Filipino Christian client.

## Understanding Anger

The common English language definition of anger is that it is a strong passion or emotion of displeasure or antagonism, excited by a real or supposed injury or insult to one's self or others, or by the intent to do such injury. In 2006, Feindler recorded five varied definitions and descriptions of anger. These were by Kennedy (1992), Novaco (1998), and Spielberger (1999). Kennedy wrote that anger is an affective state experienced as a motivation to act in ways that warn, intimidate or attack those who are perceived as challenging or threatening. Anger is coupled with and is inseparable from sensitivity to the perception of challenges or a heightened awareness of threats or irritability. It can be inferred that Kennedy's analysis emphasized anger as a passion and motivational state that promotes approach and even aggressive actions.

Novaco, on the other hand, defined anger as a negatively toned emotion subjectively experienced as an aroused state of antagonism towards someone or something perceived to be the source of aversive event. This definition, as Feindler noted, focused on the interpersonal nature of anger and the fact that there is usually a perceived stimulus thought to be aversive. It did not mention any associated cognitions that might distort the perception of the event or behaviors that might be associated with the experience. It considers anger to be an emotion, a broader term of feeling. Feelings have traditionally referred to subjective experiences, whereas emotions have referred to a constellation of subjective experiences, motor behaviors, and changes in the physiology of the body.

Furthermore, Feindler (2006) cited Spielberger's exposition of anger as a more fundamental concept that either hostility or aggression as found in his anger, hostility and aggression (AHA) syndrome. He noted that anger refers to psychobiological emotional state or condition that consists of feelings that vary in intensity from mild irritation or annoyance to intense fury and rage, accompanied by activation of neuroendocrine processes and arousal of the autonomic nervous system.

Mills (2005) described anger as a natural and mostly automatic response to pain of one form or another (physical or emotional). Anger can occur when people don't feel well, feel rejected, feel threatened, or experience some loss. The type of pain does not matter; the important thing is that the pain experienced is unpleasant. Because anger never occurs in isolation but

rather is necessarily preceded by pain feelings, it is often characterized as a 'secondhand' emotion.

Bernstein (2003) in his book *How to Deal with Emotionally Explosive People* stated that anger is highly contagious and one of its most salient symptoms is not realizing that people have it. In another distinct way of looking at anger, Averill (cited in Wilde, 1995), illustrated that “anger can be thought of as an architect’s blueprint. The availability of the blueprint does not cause a building to be constructed, but it does make the construction easier. In fact, without the blueprint, there might not be any construction at all.”

Deffenbacher (cited in Wilde, 2002) has proposed that angry individuals tend to possess numerous cognitive processing patterns that lead to increased levels of anger. He enumerated seven types of cognitive errors often committed by anger-prone individuals. The first is poor estimation of probabilities. This entails overestimating the probability of negative outcomes and underestimating the likelihood of positive outcomes. Second, thinking pattern concerns their attributional errors. It entails believing negative acts are done intentionally with the express purpose of maliciously attacking one. The third error involves over generalization as a characteristic of angry individuals. This is about using overly broad terms when describing time like excessive use of “always” and “never” and using global descriptions for people such as stupid, lazy, and so on.

The fourth pattern is dichotomous thinking which simply refers to employing black-and-white thinking. The fifth error is inflammatory labeling. Angry people use descriptive terms that are emotionally charged, which only increases the person’s anger. The sixth cognitive error deals with demandingness, as the anger-prone individual believes others should not act in certain ways or that they must not behave as they have, in fact, behaved. The last characteristic of an angry individual involves their catastrophic kind of thinking. This means that they tend to evaluate unmet demands in an exaggeratedly negative fashion.

With these seven cognitive errors, individuals who are anger-prone run the risk of translating their thoughts to actions thus interpersonal relationships may be adversely affected. Repercussions to physical health can even be felt as physiological reactions manifest when one is very angry.

## **Anger Studies in the Philippines**

It is difficult to decipher how many Filipinos are “psychologically angry and enraged” when in the 2012 Win Gallup International Association survey on Global Index of Happiness, Philippines ranked in the top 10. That means despite personal and social problems, at least for the representative respondents, they believe they are happy. Two big Filipino-owned polling companies, Social Weather Station and Pulse Asia, also disclosed in their 2012 survey that 90% of Filipinos are happy. So why dwell on anger and anger management?

Upon reviewing the literature on anger-related studies in the Philippines, Kanapi (1985) came as the closest. He explored the basic elements of the experience of anger among eight adults. This was conducted when a collective anger pushed people toward overthrowing the dictatorship (early 1980s). It was a phenomenological analysis to establish the structure of anger and its predisposing conditions. The study concluded with these identified anger experiences: 1) unconscious expectation about reality, 2) a desire or value is threatened or violated by reality, 3) an absence of full control or powerfulness over reality, 4) anxiety or fear is present in the experience, and 5) that reality is perceived as wrong and rejected.

In 1993, Carandang, a noted Filipino child and clinical psychologist and Ortigas, a pioneer in industrial-organizational psychology in the country emphasized that at the core of every case of violence is anger, a powerful emotion which often wreaks havoc in our lives because all too often it is not understood. However, Filipino studies on anger remain scarce up to today.

## **The Power of Narratives in Therapy**

All clients seek therapy for different reasons. A young adult may be disturbed because of guilt or because of hopelessness and in search for life’s meaning. A retiring woman might be engulfed with questions of insecurity and helplessness. An office employee may be consumed with so much anger that he or she has had several memos from the human resource department for uncontrollable anger.

Psychotherapists also come from varied schools of thought, thus the influence on her or his clinical practice will also vary. From that theoretical authority, clinicians’ creativity to use approaches will be explored. When in therapy, both the therapist and the client engage in a dialogue that is aimed

at specific objectives laid out in the psychological contract. It is a safe assumption that people in need want to be heard thus the need to talk, at the very least, must be satisfied.

Clients bring in their stories but are also receptive of the therapists' process of inducing the power of narratives and how it can eventually make them feel well and be well. Empirical studies suggest how stories can be an adjunct approach in the profession. Baker (2006) surmised that the use of narratives has had a long tradition in the healing arts, including reading, writing, and listening to one's own as well as others' stories. Narrative stories have been used in the context of outpatient psychotherapy (Burns, 2001) and inpatient psychiatric care (Giannini, 2001) among others. Listening to the stories of other people can bring a sense of oneness and hope. There is that unitive factor that allows the client to identify with the other person's story and the person initially auto-suggests that they went through the same thing but they have survived. It could also be an aversive factor that allows the clients to think of prevention and thinks of the case not happening to him or her. Thus, stories become a model or an example as to how people live their everyday lives. Parkinson (1999) put it this way: "we are storytellers in the way that we use the faculty to daydream, to 'see' future possibilities, connections between ideas, and events, potentials and problems and solutions, read the 'signs' and get insights into the larger patterns of life.

### **A Selected Biblical Experience of Human Anger**

In this paper, the choice of anger experience in the Bible is deliberate. At the outset, despite the 714 occurrences of ten words that explicitly communicate the presence of anger as stated by Baloain (1992) in the Old Testament (518 refer to divine wrath, and 196 refer to human anger), divine anger is not part of the narratives. As Paul Ricoeur (1969) said, the theme of God's anger is invincible, "for there is no rational justification of the innocence of God and that no one can prove that God is not responsible".

Biblical scholars who have written and published their works on anger have different emphasis but used a common method of digging up several translations, of cross-referencing one document with the other or a review of hundreds of volumes of early writings (Baloain, 1982; Latvus, 1998; Joo, 2006; Basset, 2007). Baloian's *Anger in the Old Testament* captured both the human and divine anger. God, Anger and Ideology on the other hand by Latvus focused the anger of God in Joshua and Judges. Joo highlighted the anger of God in Jeremiah in the publication *Provocation and Punishment*.

The most recent by Basset is aptly titled *Holy Anger* which underscored the accounts of Jacob, Job and Jesus. Their books have provided me a two-layered strong foundation: sociohistorical context and the theological understanding and reflection for the biblical figures I have chosen. While not totally exhaustive and sufficient, their works have been carefully considered. For focus and emphasis, the following narratives of biblical human anger are highlighted: Cain, Ahab, Absalom and Jesus.

In Genesis 4, we find Cain angry with his brother, Abel. In fact, he became so angry at Abel that he killed him. The story narrates that Abel brought his offering to the Lord and God received it with favor. A number of writings attempted to explain why God looked upon it with favor. These writers surmise that perhaps Cain's offering was in obedience to the pattern God had given Adam and Eve when He clothed them with the skins of animals, that perhaps God had made clear at that time that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Cain's reaction to all of this was to become very angry. In his conversation with the Lord, God gave him the opportunity to resolve the problem in his own heart and get things right. But here was Cain's underlying problem. Instead of taking personal responsibility, he blamed Abel. Instead of addressing the issues in his own heart he saw the problem as being something wrong with Abel. Cain had a warped perception of reality; he refused to see things as they really were. His thinking was wrong; therefore, the action he took was wrong.

Cain's reaction was by all means human. *Frustration and disappointment* fueled his anger. When someone is engulfed by such kind of emotion, it takes a very patient, levelheaded person to perform autosuggestion and say "relax, calm down, this will go away, this will pass." His anger, from my understanding, also constitutes a distinct level of shame especially when there is a great deal of expectation. Instead of confronting his current situation head on, his attention was directed to the seemingly favoured person, the object of his anger, his brother. This is a typical example of the psychoanalyst's take on displacement and so he murdered his own kin. Should angry people go that far? Blaming others for one's misery is perhaps the easiest way out. If Cain will be subjected to a personality disorder profiling, would his behaviors be symptomatic of any disorder that would require diagnosis and therefore therapy? His anger resulted in killing another person, thus his anger escalated to violence. Applying today's legal system, he will go to a trial court and when there is sufficient evidence to convict him, he will suffer for the rest of his life. Will he change if he under goes psychotherapy?

Believing in the humanistic view of the human person, maybe he will, maybe he can, but he has to be guided. Sufficient mental health care must be provided. Putting this context in the Philippine penology system, not all have psychologists in their ward. Psychological services have to be out sourced.

Ahab's account was different from Cain's story. In 1 Kings 21, Ahab tried to get Naboth to sell him some property that was situated next to the King's palace. He offered him a very reasonable amount for the land. But Naboth would not sell; he was actually obeying a scriptural mandate to keep the land in the family. No matter what King Ahab did he could not get Naboth to sell. King Ahabbe came very angry; he withdrew and began to sulk. His wife Jezebel had a different way of expressing anger: attack. Her anger was vented in a calculating vicious way; she set up a mock trial and had Naboth killed and then took his land.

The reaction of Ahab was rather strange for someone who holds power. His brooding into silence was his escape. He certainly was operating on irrational belief of the "should" and "musts". His greatest enemy was his exaggerated *sense of entitlement*; it was his most powerful inner enabling mechanism. He felt he lost total control so he instead tried self-preservation by sulking which was an unhealthy psychological reaction. He was in his weakest self when his wife over identified with his anger and fought for him in the most horrid manner—death of the cause of his husband's sulking. In family systems and marital therapy, their relationship at this stage is one that can be considered as mutually beneficial. Their personality dynamics complemented each other. Very relevant to consider is the gender expression of anger in this sense. Not all women react violently but such overblown behavior and senselessly evil intentions led to someone's death. In the present time, there might be couples who are in similar circumstance. It is therefore a question of who should see a therapist first. Is it the husband or the wife? For the helping professionals assessing this type of relationship, the basic question is on the level of awareness that they possess about how damaging they can become, first to themselves and then to the bigger group which may now include their children and extended family.

The third story focuses on Absalom. He was David's favored son. He had a sister named Tamar and a half-brother named Amnon (2 Sam.13). Amnon raped Absalom's sister and Absalom was enraged. That would be a reasonable cause for a person to be angry. The problem was with what Absalom did with that anger. He gave place to the devil. He allowed the anger to smolder in his soul. And he insisted on revenge. Absalom's vengeful

anger led not only to the murder of Amnon but became part of the plot that eventually led to Absalom's death as well.

This narrative of anger resulted in another destructive human phenomenon: *revenge and retaliation*. When someone insists on revenge, it follows a strong and firm stance and position that something very precious or someone very dear had been taken away. This insistence on revenge will motivate people to go to a place not theirs to take. When the aggrieved set themselves up as judge over others, they make a terrible mistake that significantly affects the condition of their souls. The super ego will strike in their being. This is a kind of anger outcome that touches an ancient social ill. The basic truth is that rape is a very personal assault that mirrors the loss of social structure and adherence to the law of the land. The family of Tamar suffered an injustice and the brother acted on his own. He was not able to control himself.

Another analysis can be done before the incident took place. Was Absalom a just man before it happened? Were his actions triggered primarily by the gruesome incident? These are questions that are to be considered when providing psychological help. In developed countries, the pursuit of truth and justice are usually relentless. Judicial systems are in place for its citizens to follow. In developing countries, however, the case is rather hapless. Somehow, taking the law into Absalom's hands was the only way to prosecute the suspect. Is Absalom's anger therefore an illustration of a righteous anger? It is never the role of psychologists to dichotomize behaviors as righteous or not righteous because then, the person is judged and when judgment is given, no amount of counseling or therapy will ever be effective because there is little or no more room for change or healing.

Finally, there is the story of Jesus. The New Testament in the Holy Bible depicts an episode where Jesus demonstrated anger in the temple. Jesus became very angry upon seeing many money changers in the temple—a place normally associated with worship and prayer. The people were using the temple as a place to make money; they were also cheating by giving people back less in the exchange of currency. Jesus' anger was so great that He took a whip and lashed it, scattering the crowd.

This is the only account from the New Testament that I included that gives a distinctly different view on anger. That scene depicts an anger expression with the proper motivation. It was not an indiscriminate lashing out as a result of personal slights against him. It was acted upon on very

specific focus, the sinful behavior and true injustice. If the behavior of Jesus was to be evaluated from a behavioristic point of view, then it can be deduced that because of his anger, it led to a better result. Behaviorists definitely believe that any response an individual will carry out is basically a result of a stimulus presented to him or her.

### **Implications to Psychotherapy and Applicability to Filipino Christian Clients**

#### *Making Sense of the Four: Theorizing the Path of Anger to Transformation*

The main characters in each story represent a separate plot that is by themselves independently true and very human. Each plot forms a theme and these themes are ultimately linked with each other. The first three characters for the most part, suffered the consequences of their choices and behaviors. It appears to be almost depressing and bore a pessimistic view. At one glance, it is all the human weakness and frailties while these mirror real human experience.

The first theme has captured anger as a result of frustration and disappointment. This supports the contention of Mills (2005) that often times, anger is a secondhand emotion. With the first story, it is shown that the force behind the rage is an expectation unmet. Thus in therapy, it is always the task of the clinician to understand how the disturbance develops. As EFT emphasizes, it is only through awareness of the source of frustration and disappointment that one can be helped thoroughly. Real therapeutic process takes time.

The second theme centers on the exaggerated sense of entitlement. This entitlement brings the frustration to a higher level as it forms a strong cognitive support. This belief that the person rightfully deserves something or perhaps someone is so persuasive that it becomes real to the person feeling the anger. As cognition forms part of the behavior, decisions that are eventually life-ruining may occur. Before that happens, the second component of EFT can then be applied which is emotional regulation. This stage involves self-control or resources outside of the person. Regulation involves action. To be angry is normal; what makes it abnormal or even pathological, is the failure of the person to manage it properly.



Figure 1. Anger to Transformation Model.

This framework is brought about by the power of narratives derived from the Biblical characters. This is a new insight that I am proposing in the practice of my profession. There are other third generation therapeutic approaches that involve storytelling as its method but none have put together these characters in the way that I made their stories connected to one another. In a predominantly Catholic country such as the Philippines, biblical stories are referred to with reverence. Thus, Filipino Christian clients may be drawn to listen, to open up and be helped as they can relate to the experience of anger. These characters are basically presented to draw out disclosures so that the helping process can begin.

This path of anger to transformation model is something new that I hope to contribute to psychotherapy. This model can be offered to other professions that are involved in providing care and counseling. As all therapeutic processes anticipate to end in personal growth, it is also my hope that the next Christian client I will be talking to will be able to tell me and disclose their emotional disturbance and reach that emotional transformation.

The third speaks of retaliating and of becoming violent. The anger has escalated and may be uncontrollable thus can be potentially damaging. It is as if the angry individual has no other recourse but to avenge himself or herself on the source of anger. The story plot seemed to thicken in this part. But as the four stories were concluded with a character who expresses his anger at the right time, with the right reason and motivation, this is precisely what I propose to assume in EFT's principle of transformation.

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